

Ruling on sagebrush lizard expected this week

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SANTA FE, N.M. (AP) — A small striped lizard that lives only in the wind-swept sand dunes of four southeastern New Mexico counties and four others in West Texas is about to learn its fate.

The Obama administration is expected to announce this week whether the dunes sagebrush lizard will be listed as an endangered species. Tom Buckley, a spokesman for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Albuquerque, said a decision could come as early as Thursday, The Las Cruces Sun-News reported (<http://bit.ly/LYP1hG>).

The dunes sagebrush lizard, sometimes called the sand dune lizard, lives only in sand dune complexes that have shinnery oak, a low shrub-like tree — which limits it to the Mescalero Sands area of New Mexico and part of West Texas.

Federal biologists have said the lizard has been threatened because its habitat has decreased or been fragmented by oil and gas development. If the lizard is added to the endangered species list, its habitat would be protected under federal law.

Debate over whether the lizard should receive federal protection has raged for years. Daniel Ashe, the wildlife service's director, postponed a scheduled ruling on lizard in December, saying he wanted another six months to consider scientific data.

Numerous Republicans in Congress, especially Rep. Steve Pearce of New Mexico, have argued against endangered status for the lizard. Pearce said thousands of jobs in the oil and gas industry would be in jeopardy if the lizard were listed.

The Center for Biological Diversity and other environmental groups then accused Pearce of spreading misinformation to scare the public. Ecologists with the center said the lizard occupies only about 1 percent of public lands in New Mexico where oil drilling was proposed in the last two years.

New Mexico's two Democratic U.S. senators, Jeff Bingaman and Tom Udall, have not opposed an endangered designation for the lizard, saying scientific findings should prevail, one way or another. But, like Pearce, both senators have said voluntary conservation agreements to save the lizard were working well.

These measures involve the private sector setting aside money and land to preserve the lizard's habitat. Pearce said the conservation agreements make an endangered species listing for the lizard unnecessary.

The drive to list the reptile began in May 2002, when the Center for Biological Diversity and the Chihuahuan Desert Conservation Alliance petitioned the wildlife service to list it as endangered.